

Sketch

Volume 64, Number 1

1999

Article 26

The Thing About a Truck Stop

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THE THING ABOUT A TRUCK STOP ---

My father picked me up at the bus station as the chalky gray light of morning was first breaking over Cleveland. The smell of diesel was soaked into my clothes, and my face still bore the creased imprint from the edge of the bus window I'd spent the night propped against. I shouldered my backpack and stood up when I saw him.

"Hi," I said.

"Heya." Dad looked around, anxious to busy himself with suitcases. Finding none, he lurched forward in a stiff-armed hug, patting my back a few too many times. The fabric of his green winter coat was rough against my cheek, cold. He turned abruptly. "Car's this way."

Between the two of us we figured out what streets to get on and which exits to take until we were on the Interstate. Only when the cruise control was locked into Dad's 52-to-56-miles-per-hour comfort zone did he actually speak to me.

"So what happened?" he stammered. "What the hell is going on with you? Little early for Christmas break, isn't it?" He curled and uncurled his fingers around the wheel.

I played with the heating vent cover.

"Thanks for coming."

I wasn't trying to piss him off, but I guess I did. He shook his head, then he slammed the heel of his hand on the steering wheel.

"Ohio," he mumbled. "What the hell are you doing in Ohio, anyway? Pennsylvania's that way." His thumb jerked at the road disappearing behind us. I shrugged.

“I only had enough money to get this far. Figured you’d rather drive to Cleveland than all the way to Pennsylvania.”

“Thoughtful of you.” He made a noise that sounded like snoring. “If it was up to me you’d walk.”

I said nothing. Walking didn’t seem like such a bad idea suddenly.

“Anyway,” Dad said, “you should’ve called first. I would have sent money. I’m supposed to be at work today. Know that?”

“Well, thanks again.” I didn’t know what else to say.

Ohio was flat. I’m from Iowa, so I know what flat looks like, and we’re talking *flat*. The area right around Toledo looked like it might have been drawn up on drafting tables and built by guys with protractors and plumb lines and God-knows-what-all kinds of surveying equipment. A secret government project to see if they could make a state so flat you could play billiards on it. Trees, telephone poles, and buildings, all stuck on like little plastic models around an architect’s miniature shopping mall. I watched it all float by the windows in perfect uniformity.

“So,” Dad started up again. “Are you going to tell me what happened?”

“You read the papers. I think AP picked it up.”

Two of the local TV stations had turned up, in fact. It was one of those trendy hot-button issue-*du-jour* type of deals, where NPR brings out expert panelists and there’s widespread talk of “cracking down,” and everyone acts very concerned for a couple of days. My name had come up on the second page of newspapers all over the country. Campus nightmare. Freshman dies in “binge-drinking” fiasco. Out-of-control party claims third fatal overdose of the semester; U.S. universities struggle to cope with alcohol epidemic. My fifteen minutes of fame.

“You think that’s funny?”

I didn’t. I kept my mouth shut and watched the fields drift interminably by outside. Dad shook his head.

“I can’t believe you’d let yourself get involved in something like this. What the hell were you thinking?”

“Look,” I said, “It wasn’t my fault. Not like it makes any difference now, but it wasn’t.”

“Then why did they throw you out?” His face was turning red. “They did throw you out, right?”

I sighed. “This is how it works: someone dies in a stupid way and everybody runs for cover. Somebody has to take it in the ass. That’s me.”

My only crime, as I saw it, was having signed the lease. That made it *my* out-of-control party. As far as most people were concerned, I had lured this poor child in off the street and force-fed her a bucket of supermarket vodka. The other guys got off with disciplinary probation — they only needed to expel one.

When it happened the whole school went crazy. Administrative types I’d never heard of throwing my name around, promising to get to the bottom of this. Frats falling all over each other pledging to “go dry,” cautiously smug that the inevitable disaster hadn’t gone down at a Greek house. Mandatory substance abuse training seminars for students, candlelight vigils, and outraged letters in the school paper. At our place, cops and lawyers. Reporters. Mothers Against Drunk Driving camped out on the lawn, wailing away like a Greek chorus at all hours of the night. I was almost glad to leave.

“So you had nothing to do with it. Is that right? I can tell people you were ... what, *framed*?”

“You can tell people whatever you want.” I looked at the floor. “I

didn't know her. I never even met her."

In fact, the first time I ever laid eyes on her was when Casey rolled her over, hair sticky with vomit and clinging to her cheek. She was sprawled face-down on the couch on the back porch when we found her, already a goner. She was small; she looked like a child sleeping with her mouth open. She looked like she might evaporate if we would just leave her alone. Some freshman who had invited herself in for free beer. Happens all the time. Her friends — they always come with friends — had split hours earlier. They probably figured she'd already gone home. They didn't know any more than we did that she was on our porch, unconscious and choking to death, spilled on the shitty plaid sofa we'd dragged from the curb across the street back in August.

My father was silent, but his head kept shaking, side to side, endlessly. A couple of times he breathed in sharply like he was about to say something, but both times he stopped himself and resumed head-shaking. Neither of us said anything for the rest of Ohio.

I watched him drive, because it was the only thing left to do. My dad's eyes were rigid, staring straight ahead. I noticed, for the first time, that every hair on his head had turned white. His skin seemed to hang, pink and tired, from his face. He looked old. He looked used up.

I saw her parents on TV once. They seemed like nice people ... from Chicago, I think. They had the same used-up look as my dad, but the resemblance ended there. Her father spoke to the cameras with his arm around the mother's waist. She blinked a lot. The lights were too bright for her, I think; she kept pressing her face into the father's shoulder. I don't remember seeing my parents that close together, even when they were married.

They came for the body. That seemed strange somehow; I wondered if maybe they were going to lay her out on a blanket across the back seat and bring her home that way. She was so small, there would have been room.

“It wasn’t my fault,” I said so softly I almost didn’t realize I was speaking. At first I wasn’t sure if he’d heard me either, but then I saw his eyes narrow and the tip of his tongue poke out and trace the outlines of his whitening lips as they tightened into a grim smirk. He kept quiet, but I knew he was thinking about the Pontiac. It had been my mom’s car when I was in high school, available to me only under very special circumstances — for example, picking Grandma up from the airport. Grandma ended up taking a cab that night, as it turned out, since at the time her flight landed I was hanging upside down from the Pontiac’s seatbelt in a ditch, watching the hard brown boots of state troopers kicking through the rough, shuffling grass outside my window. I felt like an idiot, but I was okay. The car was not okay. It wasn’t my fault.

We had lunch at an Arby’s by the Interstate. Dad still hadn’t spoken, but as we sat in a booth by the window, a smile spread around the Dijon chicken wrap he was chewing. Pretty soon he was laughing out loud — loud enough at one point to turn the heads of a couple of truckers across the room. I didn’t know what else to do, so I laughed too. My father’s face crinkled. He took off his glasses and he rubbed his eyes in the hollows of his palms. Putting the glasses back on in one smooth motion, he shook his head, pointing his half-eaten sandwich at me.

“You fucked up, son.” Honey Dijon sauce dribbled onto my tray. “You sure fucked up.” He clucked, head shaking, and his throat pulsed once as he swallowed. “Now, I don’t know ... maybe this is one of those

wrong place, wrong time kind of hard luck stories, but the fact is your life is pretty much over. I don't know what the hell you think you're going to do next. I'm stumped." He chuckled a little and wiped his mouth.

There was nothing I could say to him, so I got up and went out to the car, which was locked, so I stood there like an ass with my hands in my pockets, waiting for my father to come out. He took his sweet time. It was freezing; I had left my jacket in the car.

A little girl in the restaurant stared at me through a window, mashing french fries against the glass one by one. I leaned against the car, breath billowing out of my nostrils in white plumes, watching trucks rumble by on the highway. There was nothing but highway and fast food as far as the eye could see, in all directions. And even with all that empty space, with infinite distance stretched out all around me, there was nowhere to go. Just home, and still ten hours of driving to get there. I gripped my elbows hard and waited.

Back on the road, he was quiet again. He seemed relaxed now, casual. He turned on the radio. Actually sang along once. Like I wasn't even there.

It would be just like when I smashed up the car, I kept thinking. Dad had been the one to pick me up at the hospital. He talked to the cops and signed all the clipboards, and afterwards he had sat behind the wheel, a big angry stone, silent as death all the way home. He said nothing that night, just went to bed. Mom had been the one to scream like a maniac, then hug me, then scream some more. When she calmed down she tried to explain my father to me.

"He's scared," she said. She kept nodding. "He loves you so much, he's just scared."

That night I kept waking up, expecting to see him in the door of

my room with tears in his eyes, saying “Thank God you’re all right.” The next day I realized how stupid that was. He ignored me for another 24 hours, then he acted like nothing had happened, which was good enough for me. I didn’t ask questions. Pretty soon, I told myself, this would blow over too. He would stew for a few days and then he’d forget about it. I’d forget about it. By the end of the week we’d be watching bowl games together, wearing wool socks and sweatpants, and feeding the Sunday *Register* into the fireplace one section at a time.

Somewhere in Indiana we drove by a hitchhiker. My father slowed down and pulled onto the shoulder. I could see the guy in the rearview mirror, running toward us, shaggy black hair flopping at his shoulders.

“What, are you kidding?” I said. My father shrugged.

“Get in the back.”

“What?”

“Don’t be rude. Get back there.”

I stared at him for a moment, then climbed over the seat. The hitchhiker got in, smiling broadly, nodding once at each of us.

“Where can we drop you?” my dad asked him.

“Illinois,” he said, nodding. He was a Spanish guy, Mexican I guess. Pale traces of a bald spot showed through the dusty blue mesh at the back of his ball cap, and he drummed his fingers anxiously on his thighs.

“Anywhere special?”

“Illinois,” he kept nodding. “Sí. Thank you.”

“De nada.” Dad’s Spanish is pretty good. He went to high school in Texas. I don’t speak a word. Pretty soon there was a full-blown conversation in progress in the front seat. My father never bothered to translate for

me, or even acknowledge I was there, really. They were laughing and joking up front, about what I didn't know.

'Blah blah blah. El gato, sombrero, Pancho Villa, Pontiac.' Discreetly, politely, ripples of panic cracked the hitchhiker's face into smiles and wrinkles and darting eyes, glancing furtively at me in the rearview mirror. *'Taco, burrito, enchilada, expelled.'* Dad's bluster surged; he laughed louder and his head jerked around when he talked.

'Pantalones. Quesadilla. Las cucurachas entran pero no pueden salir. La freshman muerte. Fuckup.'

How do you say "disappointment" in Spanish? I looked it up: *desilusión*. I am *el desilusión grande*. Some other handy words and phrases for traveling ... *Hijo*: son. *Irresponsable*: irresponsible. *Perezoso*: lazy. *Bastardo*: bastard. *La traición dolorosa contra un padre de sus propios genes*: the bitter betrayal of a father's own genes against him.

It must have been a relief to him, saying things he could never have gotten away with otherwise, never could have said to my mother. Saying things he'd only thought about before and, saying them, making them true. Taking refuge, finally, in the smug assurance that they were true. Severing those last strands of responsibility. I knew what he was saying, and I could read his satisfaction in the way he spoke, choking on the foreign words as he strained them through the ridiculous grin on his face. I wanted to punch him in the back of the head, or open the door and jump out.

Matador: killer.

I put my head between my knees and threw up.

"Shit." He scowled. The Spanish guy turned and stole a glance at me. He was white as a sheet. I wondered if he was about to puke too.

My father flicked the turn signal and veered onto an exit ramp. It

was starting to get dark, and high above us a sign was shouting “TRUCK STOP” into the gloom in ten foot high neon letters from the top of a pole that looked taller than most of the buildings in Iowa. The hitchhiker cracked a window and tried to breathe through it as inconspicuously as possible.

Dad said something in Spanish as the car rolled into a parking space behind the truck stop. The guy thanked him and got out of the car. To say he looked relieved would be the understatement of the year. I sat staring at the puddle of chunks on the floor mat between my feet. The smell was overpowering and too familiar. Every breath reminded me of her, pale and skinny, her flesh grown gray and cold in the night air. The obscenely sweet odor of puke had saturated our backyard the same way it now saturated the car. The last breath she ever took smelled like this.

My father slumped forward, his left hand over his eyes. His head had stopped shaking.

“Dad?” I said. My voice sounded tiny to me, like a child’s. He didn’t move. “Dad? I’m sorry.”

He was taking long, deep breaths. I saw his wide, round shoulders rise and fall, and I heard the breath whistle through his nose like wind through tree branches. His white head bobbed limply along with the heaving of his shoulders.

I sat in the back seat, my father’s son, up to my ankles in vomit. Unshaved, unshowered, expelled, broke and disgraced. Somewhere behind us the State of Pennsylvania was filing documents and scheduling court dates. My name on more strange papers, flashing on the lips of strange people. My whole world was the size of a Honda Accord. It smelled like vomit, and my father was the only person in it.

“Dad,” I croaked in a voice just above a whisper. “I’m scared.”

His shoulders jerked a couple times, but other than that he didn't move. He sat like that for a while. Then he wiped snot on his sleeve and zipped up his jacket.

All he had to do was turn around. But he didn't. Didn't even glance in the mirror. Instead he opened the door and swung his feet out. He moved like an old man. A blast of air hit my face like shrapnel as the car door began its manic litany of bing-bing-bing.

"I'm gonna go get some paper towels."

The door slammed behind him.

We were in Illinois; all the cars parked around us had blue and white "Land of Lincoln" plates. Iowa was only one state over. The sky had turned a faintly iridescent purple with the disappearing sun. Only five o'clock. That's what I hate about winter — it's always pitch dark before supertime. In half an hour it would be black everywhere.

I got out of the car and stretched. The thing about a truck stop is that it's full of trucks. They're all going somewhere, and most of them are headed somewhere other than Iowa. I went looking for one. ❖